



The National Grandmother, the Co-President and the “Mom-in-Chief”

Defining the Role and Characteristics of the “Typical” First Lady

Kristín Sandra Karlsdóttir

Lokaverkefni til BA-gráðu í stjórnmálafræði

Félagsvísindasvið

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Ritgerð þessi er lokaverkefni til BA-gráðu í stjórnmálafræði og er óheimilt að afrita ritgerðina á nokkurn hátt nema með leyfi rétthafa.

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Abstract

The purpose of this thesis is to shed light on the contemporary role of the First Lady of the United States of America and to identify the characteristics of a “typical” First Lady. It is argued that these characteristics are ever-changing to a certain extent and formed in association with norms in society, including gender norms. A theoretical framework consisting of social constructivism, Barthes’ theory on the creation of myth and feminism in relation to the social construction of gender is presented to provide a foundation for the analysis. Academic research, media discourse and the behavior of former First Ladies is utilized to define a set of typical characteristics. Three examples of First Ladies are used to provide comparisons to the typical First Lady characteristics. The examples chosen are Barbara Bush, Hillary Rodham Clinton and Michelle Obama. These specific examples were chosen since Barbara Bush and Hillary Clinton have often been seen as examples of two extremes, i.e. “the traditional wife” and “the career wife”, whilst Michelle Obama has more recently been seen to seek some sort of middle ground between the two. They will thus illustrate a broad spectrum regarding how the role of the First Lady has been viewed and how it has changed. The result of the analysis indicates that although there exist certain typical characteristics, they are dependent on social norms and change with time. Furthermore the results show that whenever the First Lady goes “too far” into the political arena or is “too outspoken” efforts are made to bring her back to a more traditional feminine role.

Útdráttur

Markmið þessarar ritgerðar er að varpa ljósi á nútímahlutverk forsetafrúar Bandaríkjanna og að bera kennsl á einkenni hinnar „dæmigerðu“ forsetafrúar. Því er haldið fram að þessi einkenni séu að vissu leyti breytileg og mótist samhliða óskráðum reglum og kynjahlutverkum samfélagsins. Kenningarammi ritgerðarinnar er mótaður úr félagslegri mótunarhyggju, kenningu Barthes um mýtusköpun og femínisma í sambandi við félagslega mótun kyngervis og er ramminn notaður sem undirstaða fyrir greiningunni. Dæmigerðu einkennin eru skilgreind með því að skoða fræðigreinar, orðræðu fjölmiðla í sambandi við forsetafrúr og ummæli og hegðun fyrrum forsetafrúa. Þrjú dæmi forsetafrúa eru notuð til samanburðar við dæmigerð einkenni. Þau dæmi sem voru valin eru Barbara Bush, Hillary Rodham Clinton og Michelle Obama. Þessi tilteknu dæmi voru valin þar sem að Barbara Bush og Hillary Clinton hafa verið notaðar sem dæmi um tvo öfga, það er að segja hina „hefðbundnu eiginkonu“ og „framakonuna“, á meðan Michelle Obama getur talist sem nokkurs konar millivegur á milli þeirra. Þar af leiðandi munu þessi þrjú dæmi gefa innsýn í hvernig litið hefur verið á hlutverk forsetafrúarinnar og hvernig það hlutverk hefur breyst. Niðurstöður greiningarinnar benda til þess að þó ákveðnir dæmigerðir eiginleikar séu til þá eru þeir háðir óskráðum reglum samfélagsins og breytast með tímanum. Jafnframt er sýnt fram á að þegar forsetafrúin gengur „of langt“ í pólitíska umhverfinu eða er „of opinská“ þá er hún dregin til baka í hið hefðbundna kvenhlutverk.

Formáli

Ritgerð þessi er lokaverkefni mitt til BA prófs í stjórnmálafræði við Háskóla Íslands. Hún var unnin á vormisseri 2015 og er metin til 12 ECTS eininga. Leiðbeinandi minn var Jón Gunnar Ólafsson og vil ég þakka honum fyrir frábæra leiðsögn, hvatningu og aðstoð. Ég vil þakka bróður mínum, Kára Rafni Karlssyni, fyrir yfirlestur og aðstoð og foreldrum mínum fyrir stuðninginn í gegnum nám mitt. Einnig vil ég þakka Oddafjölskyldunni fyrir félagsskapinn og stuðninginn í gegnum skrifin.

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1 Introduction

In 1789 Martha Washington traveled to New York, which served as a temporary capital at the time, and claimed her role as the first First Lady of the United States of America. What that role entailed was not clear to her nor anyone else as there existed no set rules or guidelines for her position. In fact the term “First Lady” hadn’t even been coined at the time. As the years passed, rules of behavior and action for the First Lady started to emerge and for many members of the public the term started to mean much more than simply “the President’s wife”. First Ladies were campaigning for their husbands, hosting events, promoting causes and influencing policies as well as serving as their husband’s confidante and key supporter.¹ In 1812 Dolley Madison (the wife of President James Madison), understood the need for keeping unhappy congressmen in line so they would not vote for the opponent. According to James Blaine, who was a Senator at the time, Dolley could be credited with a large part of her husband’s victory as her chipper impartiality brought those who had reservations around and convinced them to stick with her husband.²

The American author Autumn Stephens recently said: “She’s got the whole package. She’s in a class by herself,”³ when talking about the current First Lady, Michelle Obama. But what exactly is the “whole package” and how does one “have” it? In other words, what are the traits a typical First Lady embodies? The purpose of this thesis is to shed light on the contemporary role of the First Lady of the United States of America and to identify the characteristics of a “typical” First Lady. Academic research and media discourse surrounding the First Ladies will be examined as well as former First Ladies’ remarks regarding the role and their behavior whilst serving as First Lady. It will be argued that the role of the First Lady is ever-changing to a certain extent and that the characteristics are not fixed but rather evolve with time and society. It will furthermore be argued that these characteristics are created in relation to gender norms, which have been defined as norms that provide “instruction” for how men and women are supposed to act, think and feel as well as constrain men and women

¹ Robert P. Watson, “Source Material: Toward the Study of the First Lady: The State of Scholarship,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 33 (2003): 423.

² Betty Caroli, *First Ladies: From Martha Washington to Michelle Obama*, 4th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), Kindle edition, 15-16.

³ Alma Halbert Bond, *Michelle Obama: A Biography* (Santa Barbara: Greenwood Biographies, 2012), Kindle edition, 95.

from certain behaviors that are “off limits”.⁴ These arguments will be supported by the theoretical framework of the thesis consisting of social constructivism, Barthes’ theory on the creation of myth and feminism in relation to the social construction of gender.

Three examples of First Ladies will be used to support these arguments. They are Barbara Bush, Hillary Rodham Clinton and Michelle Obama. These examples were chosen since Barbara Bush and Hillary Clinton have been seen as examples of two extremes, i.e. “the traditional wife” and “the career wife”, whilst Michelle Obama has more recently been seen to seek some sort of middle ground between the two. They thus illustrate a broad spectrum regarding how the role of the First Lady has been viewed and how it has changed. The actions and characteristics of each First Lady will be compared to those of the typical First Lady and similarities and differences will be explained using the theoretical framework of the thesis. Regarding Hillary Clinton, only her time as First Lady will be examined and not her career as a Senator, Secretary of State nor presidential candidate as it is the First Lady that is the subject of this thesis.

The sources that were used for the thesis consist mostly of scholarly reviewed articles, First Ladies’ biographies and news articles. The structure of the thesis consists of a theoretical framework where social constructivism, Barthes’ theory on the creation of myth, feminism and the social construction of gender are introduced to help develop an understanding of how certain social norms come to be and aid in the creation of typical characteristics. Following the theoretical framework there is a chapter discussing the role of the First Lady throughout the ages followed by a listing of the characteristics of a typical First Lady. This chapter is important to aid in the analysis of how the role of the First Lady has changed and evolved and thus making it possible to list certain typical First Lady characteristics which are used in the comparison with the examples. The following chapter will introduce the three examples of First Ladies with an overview of their actions and behavior during their time as First Lady followed by a brief connection to the typical characteristics. The three examples demonstrate three different types of First Ladies. Barbara Bush represents simpler times where the traditional wife was the norm, Hillary represents the career driven activist while Michelle represents the middle ground – a career driven mom. In the final chapter the typical

⁴ James R. Mahalik et al., "Development of the Conformity to Feminine Norms Inventory," *Sex Roles* 52, no. 7-8 (4, 2005): 417, accessed April 2, 2015, doi: 10.1007/s11199-005-3709-7.

characteristics will be connected to the theoretical framework, followed by a detailed connection to each example of First Lady. There it will be argued that the characteristics are socially created, closely linked to gender norms and change with time. Results will show that although each example of a First Lady can be associated with certain typical characteristics that seem to be more persistent than others, it is impossible to create one typical First Lady that remains the same throughout time and the evolution of society.

2 Theoretical framework

When discussing what qualifies as the typical First Lady of the United States of America it is important to form a theoretical framework to support the arguments that follow. The theoretical framework consists of three theories that will together shed light on how certain things become typical and why it is important to be aware of these underlying theories. The three theories that will be covered in this chapter are social constructivism, Barthes' theory on the creation of myth and feminism in association with the social construction of gender. They have each been chosen with the specific objective in mind to provide a theoretical explanation on how something becomes typical in a society and whether it is possible for these stereotypical characteristics to change with time.

2.1 Social constructivism

Social constructivism is a theory that draws insights from cognate disciplines such as sociology and psychology. The exact definition of social constructivism seems to be unclear as there are many different definitions and interpretations of the theory as opposed to a single, unitary definition. However, it can be argued that a general agreement regarding certain aspects of the theory has been reached. For example constructivists agree on the importance of language. They argue that what seems real or experienced is shaped by word and that we cannot understand the world around us without language.⁵

The many divided ideas of what defines constructivism fits quite well with the general constructivist thought as constructivists argue that the world is composed socially and that there are no absolute values.⁶ This means that people create their own image from personal experience, which varies from one person to another. In relation to this, constructivists put emphasis on the social factor as a tool for explanation. Although material factors do play a role, the main focus of constructivists is on the norms and shared understandings of what is considered to be legitimate behavior. They do not accept a single, unchangeable reality but argue that reality is a social construction that is variable. Therefore one could regard society

⁵ Mark Bauerlein, "Social Constructionism: Philosophy for the Academic Workplace," *Partisan Review* 68, no. 2 (Spring, 2001): 29-34.

⁶ Matt McDonald, "Constructivisms," in *Security Studies: An Introduction*, 2nd edition, ed. Paul D. Williams (London: Routledge, 2013), 64.

as well as its traditions and customs as socially constructed. Thus reality, according to constructivists, is dependent on social changes.⁷

The word “constructivism” is directly indicative of the main ideas behind the theory. K.M. Fierke takes a prime example of wood, a material that exists in nature, but can be formed into various objects such as a table, a chair, a carriage or even a support beam in a house. Even if these things represent material objects in and of themselves they have a particular meaning and use within a context. They are social constructs in the extent that instead of being the product of purely individual thought or meaning their shape and form is ingrained with social values, norms and presumptions.⁸

Although social constructivism can be considered as a theory that is not specific to international relations and world politics, it can nowadays be seen as one of the mainstream approaches to it.⁹ It has been used as a link between traditional theories, e.g. realism and liberalism, whereas social constructivism seeks the middle ground between two very different poles of international relations; the rationalist and reflectivist poles. It is no surprise that an attempt to occupy the middle ground between these different poles results in a rather mixed bag of approaches. This is however in line with the general constructivist thought as has been stated before.¹⁰

In the realm of world politics social constructivists analyze the interplay between structure and agency. Even if constructivists do not think that interests are a crucial part of policy-making they do not deny the notion that interests play a certain role in it and try to understand how these interests are constructed.¹¹ Social constructivists are also interested in what role ideas, norms and institutions play in foreign policy making and argue that identity and culture play an important part in international politics.¹² Social constructivists claim that culture can influence policy and argue that the reason as to why states behave in the way they do is that they are socialized into the institutions of certain types of international politics.¹³ This can be seen when one looks at organizations like the European Union. It has been argued

⁷ K.M. Fierke, “Constructivism,” in *International Relations Theories: Discipline and Diversity*, 3rd edition. ed. Tim Dunne et al. (New York: Oxford University Express, 2013), 190.

⁸ Same reference, 188-189.

⁹ Jeffrey Haynes et al., *World Politics* (Harlow: Pearson Education Limited, 2011), 219.

¹⁰ Same reference, 216-217.

¹¹ Same reference, 213-214.

¹² Fierke, *Constructivism*, 190.

¹³ Haynes et al., *World Politics*, 222.

that the European Union has developed its own culture and is often thought to socialize its member states to a certain extent, for example by having its own flag and national anthem and trying to create a certain national, European identity. Norms of behavior between states and non-state actors can also develop over time as globalization advances and they increasingly interact with each other in certain areas.¹⁴

Social constructivists do accept that material factors also play a role in state interaction but focus more on shared understandings of legitimate behavior. In this sense it has been argued that the subjects of constructivism are guided by a logic of appropriateness. This means that what is rational in the minds of constructivists is a “function of legitimacy that is defined by shared values and norms within institutions or other social structures rather than purely individual interests”. For instance there exist fundamental norms of behavior in international politics, such as sovereignty, that are regarded as first and foremost socially constructed concepts. In the case of sovereignty, the condition for recognizing the sovereignty of states lies in the shared understanding and acceptance of the definition behind the concept so in its essence it is socially constructed.¹⁵

Although constructivists may differ about numerous things it can be argued that they share the same core thought; just about everything is variable, the world is composed socially and there are no absolute values. This thought could be transferred over to the international politics realm via international relations and the study of state interaction and social norms. There seems to be no limit as to where social constructivism can be applied. It has its hands in diverse fields of study, even ones that can be hard to decipher such as the study of gender which will be discussed next.

2.2 Feminism and the social construction of gender

Social constructivism is not the only theory that deals with social norms. Feminism is a theory that has had its own ideas about social norms and their creation, use and negative and positive impacts on society and individuals. There are many different strands within feminism but they all seem to come together on the same general subject; gender. Under the inspiration of feminist theories women in non-governmental organizations and social movements have pressured international institutions and governments to adopt policies that promote the

¹⁴ Same reference, 220.

¹⁵ Fierke, *Constructivism*, 190.

equality of women - such as gender mainstreaming, which a number of international institutions and governments have adopted.¹⁶ It can therefore be argued that contemporary feminist theories have a real impact on the international arena today, whereas the creation of equality laws and the right of abortion can be traced back to miscellaneous women's movements.¹⁷ With gender as a core concept feminists aim to reach both political and economic equality for women.¹⁸

It has been argued that gender does not simply mean being either male or female and thus a distinction has been drawn between the terms "sex" and "gender". Although opinions vary on the exact definitions of these terms the most common definitions are that sex refers to individuals' biological characteristics and gender refers to individuals' psychological characteristics, behavior and cultural influences.¹⁹ The social construction of gender is something that is widely discussed and accepted in diverse sociological discourse. Gender is not viewed as a fixed or static identity but as a product that is constructed and performed in interaction. It is a social construct.²⁰

People often associate a particular gender with a particular sex. Femininity is associated with being female and masculinity with being male. In her book *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir said that a person is not born but rather *becomes* a woman. In relation to this the philosopher and gender theorist Judith Butler argues that gender is not a stable identity but an identity created through conventionalized repetition of acts and as a result coined the term "gender performativity", which has been used in a variety of academy fields.²¹ In their article "Doing Gender", Candace West and Don Zimmerman (1987) argue that gender is something we "do" every single day. We do gender when we choose what to wear, how to cut our hair and in our relationships.²²

¹⁶ J. Ann Tickner, "Gender in World Politics," in *The Globalization of World Politics: An Introduction to International Relations*, 4th edition, ed. John Baylis et al. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 27.

¹⁷ Silja Bára Ómarsdóttir, "Áhrif feminisma á utanríkisstefnu Íslands 1999-2009," *Stjórnmal og stjórnsýsla* 1, no. 6 (2010): 79.

¹⁸ Tickner, *Gender in World Politics*, 264-265.

¹⁹ Charlene L. Muehlenhard and Zoe D. Peterson, "Distinguishing between Sex and Gender: History, Current Conceptualizations, and Implications," *Sex Roles* 64, no. 11-12 (06, 2011): 791.

²⁰ Dana Berkowitz, Namita N. Manohar and Justine E. Tinkler, "Walk Like a Man, Talk Like a Woman: Teaching the Social Construction of Gender," *Teaching Sociology* 38, no. 2 (04, 2010): 132.

²¹ Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," *Theatre Journal*, 40, No. 4 (12, 1988): 519.

²² Candace West and Don H. Zimmerman, "Doing Gender," *Gender and Society* 1, no. 2 (6, 1987): 135.

These gender performances, as Butler would call them, are controlled by social norms that differ from one society to another. This is closely related to the social constructivist thought that the world is composed socially and there are no absolute values - what is considered a norm in one culture might not be in another. In Western popular culture, for example, femininity is commonly associated with being caring, nurturing, and attractive.²³

Extreme deviations from these “proper” displays of gender are often stigmatized or labelled as perverted. Drag shows can be used as an example; males dress up as females or vice versa. Social norms are taken and twisted around which leaves certain members of the public confused, even upset. Butler, however, does not think that drag should be considered as true gender performativity. It is not the true intent of the performer to identify him-/herself with the gender he/she is performing. Butler instead says that what is performed can only be understood by looking at what is blocked or prohibited from the signifier within the realm of physical legibility.²⁴ To understand what Butler means by “signifier” there is a need to discuss another theory; a theory on myths created by Roland Barthes.

2.3 Roland Barthes’ theory on the creation of myths

Roland Barthes was a French essayist and social and literary critic who is mostly known for his work on semiotics which is the study of symbols and signs pioneered by the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. It has been argued that his work on semiotics helped establish structuralism and new structuralism as prominent intellectual movements and his work in his book *Mythologies* made him the first French writer to seriously analyze popular culture. He is best known for showing how language can be socially constructed by using familiar, everyday experiences as examples and in that sense can be closely linked to social constructivism. Like constructivists, Barthes argues that objects, events and individuals gain their “identity” through the meaning that each person or society puts into them and thus creating what he calls myths.²⁵

In his theory on myth Barthes seeks to explain how myth comes to be and uses semiotics to explain that process. Semiology was postulated by Saussure and is a science of

²³ Mahalik et al., *Feminine norms*, 418.

²⁴ Judith Butler, “Critically Queer,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 1, no. 1 (11, 1993):24, accessed March 15, 2015, doi: 10.1215/10642684-1-1-17.

²⁵ Philip Thody, *Roland Barthes: A Conservative Estimate* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 2.

signs or forms that studies significations apart from their content. For example Barthes claims that images and visual representations are symbols that provide underlying and socially based meanings and messages. He asserts that objects are so called “signifiers” that represent or embody a certain idea or ideology and calls that meaning the “signified”. When one brings the signifier and the signified together they form a third entity, the “sign”. The sign is where the object and meaning are merged together and cannot be removed from each other.²⁶

The sign can also be a signifier in a second order of meaning in the sense that it can be a part of an overarching ideology or set of sociocultural beliefs. This overarching ideology is what Barthes calls the “concept”. Together the second-order signifier, the “form”, and signified, the “concept”, make up the “signification”. This means that the form, or language, acts as a vessel carrying a certain message. As such, the two cannot be divided and form the third concept of signification which may be transformed into myth.²⁷ For example the American flag is not just a red, white and blue star spangled piece of cloth. For many Americans it signifies their country and carries a message of freedom and liberty. It can invoke such deep feelings of patriotism in Americans that in 2007 there was a proposal for a constitutional amendment that would have allowed Congress to ban desecration of the American flag.²⁸ The flag can invoke entirely different feelings for people of other cultures that may carry hostile feelings towards the U.S. Although the flag may symbolize America for them as well it might not carry the same positive message of freedom and liberty but rather of oppression and occupation as in the case of the flag burning in Baghdad on the 6th anniversary of the Iraq war and subsequent U.S. occupation of the country.²⁹

Barthes states that since mythology studies ideas-in-form it is a part of semiology, as it is a formal science, and of ideology, as it is a historical science. Any semiology hypothesizes a relation between a signifier and a signified and concerns objects which belong to different categories. It is a relation of equivalence - not one of equality. One is dealing with three

²⁶ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (London: Vintage, 2009), 110.

²⁷ David C. Ogden “Major League Baseball and Myth Making: Roland Barthes's Semiology and the Maintenance of Image,” *Nine*, 15, no. 2 (Spring, 2007): 67.

²⁸ Carl Hulse and John Holusha, “Amendment on Flag Burning Fails by One Vote in Senate,” *New York Times*, June 27, 2006, accessed April 15, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/06/27/washington/27cnd-flag.html>.

²⁹ *The Associated Press*, “US flag-burning in Baghdad marks 6th anniversary of Iraq War,” March 20, 2009, accessed April 15, 2015, <http://www.nydailynews.com/news/world/flag-burning-baghdad-marks-6th-anniversary-iraq-war-article-1.370486>.

terms, the signifier, signified and the sign. Myth is a second-order semiotic system – it takes an already constituted sign and turns it into a signifier. Barthes takes an example with roses given to someone to express the giver's passion. The signifier is in this case the roses and the signified would be the passion. The sign is therefore the passion laden roses formed by twining the signifier and signified together.³⁰ Take a spruce tree, for example, and all the things associated with it. You have the smell of the tree, pine cones that fall off it and the soil the tree grows out of. If one pushes those thoughts aside – they're still there, in the background – and one adds things like gifts, consumerism, Christmas and Christmas decorations. Then one has the myth that is the "Christmas tree". The tree is no longer a simple spruce tree, it has been transformed into a sign – a myth.

Putting semiology aside, what exactly is a myth? Barthes defines myth as a type of speech. He argued that it is a system of communication – a message. It is not defined by the purpose of its message but by the way in which this message is articulated. In light of this myth cannot be an object, concept or an idea. It is a mode of signification or as Barthes likes to call it: a form. This can be associated with the social constructivist thought that what seems real or experienced is shaped by word. Furthermore Barthes claims that everything can be myth as there are only formal limits to myth but no "substantial" ones - as long as it is expressed by discourse it can be myth. Barthes justifies this statement by saying that there is no object in the world that can't go from a closed, silent existence to an oral state. Everything is open to appropriation by society as there is no law, natural or not, that bans talking about things.³¹ In that sense Barthes does not limit discourse simply to language, written or oral speech. He states that a photograph will be a type of speech in the same way as a newspaper article is. As long as an object means something, it is speech. He supports this statement with references to the very history of writing and provides as an example the acceptance of objects such as pictographs as speech long before the invention of our alphabet.³²

Barthes specifies that although everything can be myth not everything is expressed at the same time. Some objects become myths for a while, then they disappear and other objects take their place and obtain the status of myth. He states that even if there exist very ancient myths there are no eternal ones. In this case Barthes refers to the fact that it is human history

³⁰ Barthes, *Mythologies*, 111.

³¹ Same reference, 107.

³² Same reference, 109.

which turns reality into speech and as such has the sole power over the life and death of mythical language. Since myth is a type of speech chosen by history it can only have a historical foundation and cannot evolve from the “nature” of things. Barthes’ main objection to myth is that it removes history from language and makes certain signs appear natural or eternal. As such it transforms history into nature. Its main function is to freeze language and does this by reducing an intricate phenomenon into merely a few traits which are then taken as definitive.³³ In a way one could say that myths are created in similar ways as stereotypes are.

2.4 Stereotypes

The modern psychological meaning of the term “stereotype” is believed to have been first coined by the American writer Walter Lippmann as oversimplified generalizations about groups or categories of people. Stereotypes are formed when people make extreme trait and evaluative judgments of a group, even on the basis of very little information about the members of the group. Once these stereotypes have been formed they often serve as a primary basis for judging groups and their members.³⁴ This process has generally been associated with prejudice - individuals are categorized on the basis of obvious characteristics such as sex or race. A set of characteristics is attributed to all members of a particular category and thus the same set of characteristics is attributed to any individual member of that category.³⁵ Stereotyping can however be based on both positive and negative traits at the same time. Cheerleaders, for example, can be seen to be both stereotypically beautiful and dumb.

When discussing stereotypes it is important to acknowledge the difference between types and stereotypes. In his essay on “Stereotyping” Richard Dyer (1977) sets out to clarify this difference. He argues that we understand the world by assigning objects, people or events to general descriptive arrangements that they fit into according to each particular culture. In that sense, we “decode” a round, hollow object that we place flowers into as a “vase” even if

³³ Same reference, 108.

³⁴ Sheri R. Levy, Steven J. Stroessner, and Carol S. Dweck, “Stereotype Formation and Endorsement: The Role of Implicit Theories,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 74, no. 6 (06, 1998): 1421.

³⁵ M. Snyder, “On the Self-Perpetuating Nature of Social Stereotypes,” in *Cognitive Processes in Stereotyping and Intergroup Behaviour*, ed. D. Hamilton (Hillsdale: Erlbaum, 1981), 415.

we have never seen that kind of vase before. Because we have a general concept of a vase in our heads we can “fit” this object we encountered into the vase category. We employ something called typification; the “particular” is understood in terms of its “type”.³⁶

Dyer argues that we constantly use typifications and wider categories to make sense of things. We come to know something about a person in relation to the role they play in society; their job, social status, are they a parent or a child? People are assigned membership of different groups according to class, age group, nationality, sexual preference etc. We build an identity for a particular person based on the information we gather from placing him/her within different orders of typifications. Dyer thus defines types as any “simple, vivid, memorable, easily grasped and widely recognized characterization in which a few traits are foregrounded and change or “development” is kept to a minimum”. Here one arrives at the core definition of what a stereotype is; the few “simple, vivid, memorable, easily grasped and widely recognized” characteristics about a person are taken and everything about the person is reduced to those traits. They are exaggerated, simplified and fixed without change or development to eternity. Stereotyping reduces, essentializes, naturalizes and fixes “difference”. Thus, it can be argued that what mainly sets types and stereotypes apart lies in extremes. Basic traits and characteristics are what let us categorize objects, events and individuals into certain types. It is extremes regarding these traits and characteristics in the form of reducing everything about a person to these traits that can aid in the creation of stereotypes.³⁷

Stereotyping also uses something called “splitting”. Splitting is when the “normal” and the acceptable is divided from the “abnormal” and the unacceptable and everything which does not fit or is different is excluded. Social types are those who live by the rules of society, someone one would expect to find in one’s society, whereas stereotypes are the ones whose rules are designed to exclude and do not belong in one’s society. For instance a social type one would expect to encounter in Iceland is a white Icelander whereas a stereotype that would not “belong” to that particular society could, for instance, be a black American. Dyer argues

³⁶ Stuart Hall, “The Spectacle of the ‘Other’,” in *Representation*, ed. Stuart Hall (London: SAGE Publications, 1997), 257.

³⁷ Same reference, 257-258.

that it is for this reason that stereotypes are more rigid than social types – they symbolically establish boundaries and exclude everything which does not belong.³⁸

A concept that is closely related to stereotypes is “othering”. It involves the importance of difference and in the book *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, Stuart Hall lists four explanations as to why difference matters. This thesis focuses specifically on the second explanation; “we need “difference” because we can only construct meaning through a dialogue with the “other”. ”³⁹ This means that meaning is maintained in the dialogue between two or more speakers – it has no single meaning on its own and must be adapted by each person. Everything we say and mean is altered by the interaction with another person and it emerges through all the differences that exist between participants in each dialogue.⁴⁰ Thus what is considered to be other differs from person to person, from one social group to another. This falls in line with the general social constructivist thought that has been previously discussed.

Stereotyping is closely related to othering in the sense that it sets up a symbolic border between what is considered “normal” and the “abnormal”, what is acceptable and what is unacceptable, what “belongs” and what does not – the “other”. Those who are considered normal form one community and symbolically exile all of the “others” who are in some way different.⁴¹ Political partisanship, for example, is a common area where othering is found. In the United States people generally identify themselves as Republican or Democrat and often think of everyone else, others, to be a homogeneous group. If you do not identify yourself as a Democrat or a Republican you belong to that other group.

Social norms play a pivotal role in stereotyping, othering and social constructivism as they define what is stereotypical, what is “other” and what is socially constructed. Social norms also place meaning into certain myths, which are socially constructed. Social constructivism can thus be applied to a number of things, explaining and clarifying various concepts and connecting them as a whole.

³⁸ Same reference, 258.

³⁹ The other reasons given are: “”difference” matters because it is essential to meaning; without it meaning could not exist”, “the marking of “difference” is...the basis of...symbolic order which we call culture” and “the “other” is fundamental to the constitution of the self, to us as subjects, and to sexual identity”. Hall, *Spectacle*, 234-237.

⁴⁰ Same reference, 235.

⁴¹ Same reference, 258.

With all these theories and the overarching framework in mind, one could say that the term “typical First Lady” is socially constructed by social and gender norms in the society that is the United States of America. It is a stereotype of how a woman in that position should carry herself and what her traits should be. In the following chapter the role of the First Lady will be examined and typical characteristics will be defined. The chapter will begin with a brief overview of the role of the First Lady dating back to the very first one, Martha Washington, followed by what it is today. This will aid in the analysis of how the role of the First Lady has changed and evolved, thus making it possible to list certain typical First Lady characteristics with the help of the theoretical framework.

3 Role of the First Lady

In this chapter the role of the First Lady will be examined and how it has changed throughout the years. The chapter will begin with a brief overview starting with the first First Lady, Martha Washington, followed by more contemporary examples. Typical characteristics will then be defined although it will be argued that they are not set in stone as the First Lady and her role change with time.

The following chapter will examine how Barbara Bush, Hillary Clinton and Michelle Obama fit into the mold of a typical First Lady of the United States of America. These examples were specifically chosen as although the three First Ladies have similar traits that they share with each other they also have specific identifying features that set them apart. This will aid in showing the difficulty of describing one, set typical First Lady. Barbara Bush was specifically selected because of her perception as a presidential matriarch and a traditional political wife, providing a stark contrast to Hillary Clinton's more active take on the role. Michelle Obama, being the current First Lady, was selected to provide the most modern, up to date example of a First Lady. As the first African-American to hold this position she could provide an interesting angle to the typical characteristics associated with the role. Together these three examples will shed light on the role of the contemporary First Lady and how differing that role can be.

3.1 Evolvment of the role

Although the U.S. Constitution lays out the specific duties for the President there exists no written description of the First Lady's role. There is no mention of his spouse in the Constitution at all – even if she has become a considerable part of the presidency. Both Eleanor Roosevelt and Bess Truman were named as among the most powerful people in Washington during their husbands' administrations and Betty Ford once said that she resorted to “pillow” talk to convince her husband of her point of view.⁴²

In spite of this the First Lady has throughout history often been regarded as simply the President's wife, his confidant and mate. Bess Truman once described the First Lady's role as requiring that she simply sit silently beside her husband and made sure that her hat sat

⁴² Caroli, *First Ladies*, intro.

on straight.⁴³ George and Martha Washington set the precedent by hosting public entertaining and state events and thus established the role of the First Lady as a social and ceremonial partner to the President.⁴⁴ According to social norms the First Lady was meant to play the role of the nation's hostess, hosting dinners and events, be an advocate of her husband's policies and perform the duties that were expected of any wife at the time – only to a greater scale. She was also a fashion role model and would get criticized for her looks. Elizabeth Monroe, for example, was criticized for appearing much younger than her age and for her possible use of cosmetics, which were a taboo subject when she was First Lady in 1817-1825.⁴⁵

It can be argued that the role of the First Lady has changed considerably over the years. For example Eleanor Roosevelt has been credited with a drastic and permanent change in the role of the First Lady. With her outspokenness, visibility and activity she has been said to have changed it into something independent, albeit linked to, the Oval Office as well as forever changing the public's expectation of the First Lady. For example it was under Eleanor Roosevelt that the East Wing of the White House first became the First Lady's focal point. She was the first presidential spouse to speak at a national convention and serve as a radio commentator. She held regular press conferences which provided her with a press office to promote her own issues and she was the first First Lady to hire a personal secretary. It was predicted that after her departure from the White House in 1945 the public would want an active woman in the White House and the passive, retiring First Lady would be gone for good.⁴⁶ Other First Ladies have also played a part in the evolution of the role as Nancy Reagan has been credited with elevating the job of First Lady to a kind of "Associate Presidency", Betty Ford publicly took stands at odds with those of her husband and Rosalynn Carter attended cabinet meetings. When the Clintons were in the White House reporters regularly relayed the views of both the President and the First Lady on important issues and events – proving that the First Lady had outgrown her status as simply "the President's wife".⁴⁷

⁴³ Anthony J. Eksterowicz and Kristen Paynter, "The Evolution of the Role and Office of the First Lady: The Movement Toward Integration with the White House Office," *The Social Science Journal* 37, no. 4 (2000): 551.

⁴⁴ Edith P. Mayo, "Party Politics: The Political Impact of the First Ladies' Social Role," *The Social Science Journal* 37, no. 4 (2000): 577.

⁴⁵ Caroli, *First Ladies*, 17-18.

⁴⁶ Eksterowicz and Paynter, *Evolution of the role and office*, 549-550.

⁴⁷ Caroli, *First Ladies*, intro.

In the beginning of the 20th Century there were many indications that the job of the First Lady was changing. Lou Hoover, Jacqueline Kennedy, Pat Nixon and Barbara Bush have all been accredited with expanding the First Lady's role from a simple ceremonial presence to a more active emerging spokesperson. All of them spent quite some time in the public spotlight and were no strangers to press demands and the need for public discourse.⁴⁸ First Ladies started to hire separate staffs of their own, they took more public roles in policy and personnel decisions and lead important reform movements. Even though the job was still unpaid it had become quasi-institutionalized.⁴⁹

3.2 The “typical” First Lady

When defining the characteristics of a stereotypical First Lady one runs into many definitional obstacles. The population from which to draw samples is not substantial and the First Ladies often prove to be very different from one another and have different takes on the role. With such an uneven base can be difficult to discern a particular trend among the First Ladies. Most of them, however, have certain traits in common, e.g. being known rather for their social skills, charm and good looks than anything they ever said or did. The way society and political culture changes with time must also be taken into consideration and particular attention must be paid to how women's roles and issues are different from one era to another.⁵⁰ What is considered to be stereotypical now is different from what was stereotypical 40 years ago. This is in accordance with Barthes' theory on the creation of myth where he states that something can be a myth for one period of time and then as time passes and society and social norms change it can be replaced with something else.

Reverting back to social constructivism, it can be argued that it is society itself and social norms that define the characteristics that embody the stereotypical First Lady. A key influence in the composition of society is the agenda setting role of the mass media. The agenda setting theory supposes that what the media finds important, members of society will eventually find important.⁵¹ People do not only obtain factual information about public affairs

⁴⁸ Myra Gutin, “Using all Available Means of Persuasion: The Twentieth Century First Lady as Public Communicator,” *Social Science Journal* 37, no. 4 (2000): 566.

⁴⁹ Caroli, *First Ladies*, 118.

⁵⁰ Eksterowicz and Paynter, *Evolution of the role and office*, 548.

⁵¹ Maxwell McCombs, *Setting the Agenda: The Mass Media and Public Opinion* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004), 1.

from the media; they also learn how much importance to attach to a topic based on the emphasis placed on said topic in the news.⁵² With the agenda setting role of mass media in mind it could thus be argued that since it aids in the creation of public opinion it also assists in the creation of social norms. That is, what is acceptable behavior and what is not.

Although the role of the First Lady has changed there exist some traits which applied to the very first First Lady, Martha Washington, that still apply to the modern First Lady while others have formed with time. Following the discourse in current American media and society as well as keeping social and gender norms in mind one could argue that the First Lady should first and foremost be a supportive helpmate advocating for her husband. She should play an important part as a spokesperson and advocate her husband's political agenda. She should also be a fixture on the campaign trail as she should travel with her spouse and appear in campaign advertisements and is expected to be vocally supportive.⁵³ It can be taken unfavorably when a First Lady, or a potential one, does not want to campaign with her spouse as voters start to question as to why she isn't supporting her husband. If she isn't, why should they? The First Lady can be seen to help humanize the candidate as she is, presumably, closest to the candidate and thus provides a window into a politician's character. She should act as a certain validator as to why voters should support this particular candidate.⁵⁴

The typical First Lady has been regarded as warm, friendly and approachable as well as being classy and modest in attire and behavior. Michelle Obama's attire has been criticized on numerous occasion for not conforming to the aforementioned traits and her therefore not looking or acting the part of a First Lady.⁵⁵ The typical First Lady has been expected to give up her job to help fulfill her husband's ambitions as is evidenced by Laura Bush giving up her job as a librarian and Hillary Clinton giving up her law practice as she moved into the White

⁵² Okafor Godson Okwuchukwu, "The Influence of Media Ownership and Control on Media Agenda Setting in Nigeria," *International Journal of Humanities Social Sciences and Education* 1, no. 7 (7, 2014): 39.

⁵³ Valerie A. Sulfaro, "Affective Evaluations of First Ladies: A Comparison of Hillary Clinton and Laura Bush," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 37, no. 3 (09, 2007): 488.

⁵⁴ Jodi Wilgoren, "THE 2004 CAMPAIGN: THE EX-GOVERNOR'S WIFE; The Other Doctor in Dean's House Shuns Politics," *New York Times*, January 13, 2004, accessed April 12, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/01/13/us/2004-campaign-ex-governor-s-wife-other-doctor-dean-s-house-shuns-politics.html>.

⁵⁵ Ari Shapiro, "Romney Courts Vets at American Legion Convention," *NPR*, August 30, 2012, accessed April 12, 2015, <http://www.npr.org/2012/08/30/160293862/romney-courts-veterans-at-american-legion-convention>.

House. This may be an indicator of an underlying tendency amongst people to belittle influential women and penalize the ones who step out on their own platforms.⁵⁶

Most First Ladies have chosen a noncontroversial, charitable cause to promote and as a result it has become expected of them to do so. This expectation of First Lady activity has become so prevalent that in recent decades it has become the norm to ask potential First Ladies what their causes will be during the presidential campaign.⁵⁷ In addition to promoting causes the First Lady is responsible for the day-to-day operation of the White House as well as being the President's official hostess. She has important ceremonial duties such as hosting teas and formal dinners, greeting foreign visitors and making social calls. In an attempt to de-professionalize herself Hillary Clinton purposely dressed in a feminine high fashion dress for the media to see and selected china for her first formal White House dinner. This is an example of how ingrained the role of hostess is in the institution that is the First Lady.⁵⁸

Based on the previous discussion it can be argued that the role and characteristics of the First Lady has changed and evolved with time and as a result it can be difficult to define specific typical characteristics. It is, however, not impossible, e.g. by examining media discourse some common traits can be found that seem to appeal to Americans and persevere throughout time. Thus it can be argued that the typical First Lady is first and foremost a supportive helpmate advocating for her husband. She can be seen as his spokesperson, advocating his agenda, a vocally supportive fixture on his campaign trail that travels with him and appears in campaign ads for him. She is a validator as to why people should support him and is warm, friendly and approachable. She is classy, modest both in attire and behavior and gives up her job once moving into the White House and assumes the traditional feminine role. She should not go too far in influencing the President yet she should promote noncontroversial, charitable causes. The typical First Lady represents American women to the world and is the official hostess of the nation.

⁵⁶ Caroli, *First Ladies*, 343.

⁵⁷ Sulfaro, *Affective Evaluations*, 488.

⁵⁸ Karen O'Connor, Bernadette Nye, and Laura Van Assendelft, "Wives in the White House: The Political Influence of First Ladies," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 26, no. 3 (Summer, 1996): 843-844.

3.3 Barbara Bush

At the age of 63, Barbara Bush was the oldest woman to take on the role of First Lady and move into the White House.⁵⁹ She is the wife of the forty-first President of the United States George H. W. Bush, mother to the forty-third President George W. Bush, and is regarded by many as one of the most popular First Ladies in U.S. history. According to Gallup polls she has repeatedly been ranked as one of the most admired women in the world. Her looks play a big part in her public persona and her white-hair, wrinkled face and fake pearls have often been seen to procure a familiar image of a grandmother amongst many Americans.⁶⁰ She was said to play up this grandmother image by saying that she was everybody's grandmother, including recovering drug addicts and alcoholics whom she sometimes sat with and prayed.⁶¹ In turn this grandmotherly image was frequently mentioned in news articles and can be seen as an identifying feature of Barbara's. In an interview with *Vanity Fair* in 1992 she was described as being "America's grandmother, casual, capable, down-to-earth: she is fake pearls and real family"⁶² and an article in the *LA Times* claimed that the creation of this image was the cleverest thing Barbara ever did.⁶³

Her short, white hair, wrinkles and fake pearls became a new standard by which American women could measure themselves to.⁶⁴ She was said to symbolize the average homemaker of her generation and is identified with stability and traditional family values.⁶⁵ Adjectives such as "unpretentious", "down-to-earth" and "genuine" are not uncommon when describing Barbara Bush and Duane Garrett, a San Francisco lawyer and leading Democratic fund-raiser, has gone so far as claiming that Mrs. Bush was the strongest political asset George Bush had with average Americans.⁶⁶ This description came as a result of the

⁵⁹ Caroli, *First Ladies*, 289.

⁶⁰ Lisa M. Burns, "Barbara Bush: Presidential Matriarch," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 39.4 (Dec 2009): 963-964.

⁶¹ Donnie Radcliffe, *Simply Barbara Bush: A Portrait of America's Candid First Lady* (New York: Warner Books, 1989), 6.

⁶² Marjorie Williams, "Barbara's Backlash," *Vanity Fair*, August 1992, accessed April 12, 2015, <http://www.vanityfair.com/magazine/1992/08/williams199208>.

⁶³ Donnie Radcliffe, "Barbara Bush in Key Role, Far More Than 'Everybody's Grandmother' : First Lady: 'George's wife' is critical to President's image, key element in reelection campaign," *LA Times*, February 16, 1992, accessed April 12, 2015, http://articles.latimes.com/1992-02-16/news/mn-4595_1_barbara-bush.

⁶⁴ Radcliffe, *Simply Barbara Bush*, 3.

⁶⁵ Same reference, XIV.

⁶⁶ Susan Page, "Why America Loves Barbara Bush She's Warm. She's Tough. She Looks Like Everybody's Grandmother - and She may be Her Husband's Biggest Political Asset," *Newsday*, Nov 11, 1990, combined editions.

President's approval ratings rapidly declining on account of events such as the Los Angeles riots in 1992 as well as a scandal regarding Bush family members appearing to have exploited their relationship with the White House. In the midst of these troubles, Barbara Bush proved to be a steady, positive fixture, devoting much of her time to causes such as literacy and caring for AIDS victims.⁶⁷

Barbara was born in 1925 and grew up in Rye, New York.⁶⁸ She went to college in Charleston, South Carolina for her final two years but for most women of her generation college was considered a waiting game until they could find a man to marry and provide them with a good life. For Barbara it was no different and it was there that she met her future husband, George H. W. Bush.⁶⁹ Barbara grew up at a time when daughters were less likely to go to college than their brothers and she never earned a degree. In a *New York Times* article she was once referred to as an icon of "an older generation of wives who stayed at home"⁷⁰ and in another article it was said that conservative Republicans held her up as a symbol of traditional wifeliness.⁷¹ Barbara herself has indicated that the division of labor in her home remained along traditional lines of female and male roles as she said that she doesn't "fool around with his office" and he leaves her household alone – crediting their successful marriage to, amongst other things, this division of labor.^{72 73} She was said to have taken her role as a hostess seriously and was described as having a "folksy" hospitality that could put anybody at ease and make them feel comfortable.⁷⁴ Her formal entertaining was also described as "gracious but unceremonious" and it was not uncommon to see Millie, the family

⁶⁷ Glenn F. Bunting, "Barbara Bush : The President's Biggest Asset in a Time of Political Trouble," *LA Times*, May 31, 1992, accessed April 12, 2015, http://articles.latimes.com/1992-05-31/opinion/op-1424_1_barbara-bush.

⁶⁸ Radcliffe, *Simply Barbara Bush*, 71-72.

⁶⁹ Caroli, *First Ladies*, 285.

⁷⁰ Alessandra Stanley, "REPUBLICANS IN HOUSTON: MARILYN QUAYLE; Republicans Present Marilyn Quayle As a Self-Sacrificing 90's Supermom," *New York Times*, August 18, 1992, accessed April 12, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/1992/08/18/news/republicans-houston-marilyn-quayle-republicans-present-marilyn-quayle-self.html>.

⁷¹ Alessandra Stanley, "THE 1992 CAMPAIGN: Barbara Bush; First Lady on Abortion: Not a Platform Issue," *New York Times*, August 14, 1992, accessed April 12, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/1992/08/14/us/the-1992-campaign-barbara-bush-first-lady-on-abortion-not-a-platform-issue.html>.

⁷² Donnie Radcliffe, "Barbara Bush: Unassuming, Underestimated, Stumping for the Veep," *Washington Post*, June 5, 1988.

⁷³ Radcliffe, *Simply Barbara Bush*, 195.

⁷⁴ Same reference, 223.

dog, running around with a tennis ball in her mouth at black-tie events, giving a homey flair to an otherwise formal affair.⁷⁵

Barbara often played down her involvement in George Bush's political career. Her involvement however did not go unnoticed by his aides as they saw her as a key campaign adviser. She would frequently dismiss the importance of her presence at important briefings and refer to the fact that someone needed to feed and house the attendees of these briefings, thus diminishing her role to a mere hostess.⁷⁶ She was considered as one of George's strongest advocates, never missing the chance to talk him up. When someone wrote to her asking if besides doing needlepoint and playing tennis she ate bonbons, implying she did nothing all day, Barbara Bush wrote back citing the 1192 events she hosted at the Vice President's house and 1232 Washington events she attended outside the residence. Instead of leaving the response at that she finished with a campaign plug for George, saying that if they thought her schedule was full then George's schedule made it seem like all she did was sit at home doing needlepoint, playing tennis and eating bonbons.⁷⁷

Sheila Tate, George's campaign press secretary, was certain that Barbara had a positive influence on George. She said that there were telltale signs; when Barbara was with him he would tend to become a kinder, gentler candidate and the emotional issues such as the homeless, hunger etc. were all higher on his agenda because of Barbara's influence. After the presidential election Barbara's influence on George's administration was cemented as George appointed three men to high positions. Barbara knew these men personally and they would all be leading figures dealing with social problems that were of particular concern to her. She had been on the board of trustees of Atlanta's Morehouse College School of Medicine which was headed by Dr. Louis H. Sullivan who George appointed as Secretary of Health and Human Services. She was also friendly with both Jack F. Kemp who was appointed as Secretary of Housing and Urban Development and William J. Bennett who was the administration's director of the Office of National Drug Control Policy.⁷⁸

Despite clearly being an influential force on her husband, when talking to the press Barbara kept her views to herself. This was perhaps in part due to her brief stint with sarcasm

⁷⁵ Same reference, 11.

⁷⁶ Same reference, 200.

⁷⁷ Same reference, 172-173.

⁷⁸ Same reference, 198-199.

in the 1984 election when she described Geraldine Ferraro, the Democratic candidate for Vice President, as “a 4-million dollar...I can’t say it but it rhymes with rich.” She later claimed that she meant “witch” but the damage had been done. Once her husband was elected there was no public repetition of a similar event. Even if she was believed to hold differing views to her husband’s on gun control laws and abortion she managed to avoid attempts to put those views on public record. When talking to the press she stuck to noncontroversial topics such as those related to her family and her hostess duties.⁷⁹ When asked if she had decided to “muzzle” herself because she was First Lady she responded that she had decided to “muzzle” herself many years ago when George first went into congress. She claimed that she had made the decision to only tell George in private when she disagreed with him, admitting that she had occasionally had slippage, thus referring to the Geraldine Ferraro incident.⁸⁰

As previously discussed, First Ladies have a long tradition of using their influence to promote a particular cause. Barbara Bush chose literacy as her cause, saying that she wanted to do something that wasn’t controversial, would help the most people possible and maybe not cost more government money.⁸¹ In a *New York Times* article she was quoted saying that in 10 years of traveling around the United States of America and visiting various schools, literary programs, libraries etc. she came to the realization that the problem of illiteracy must be attacked through the family as “we all know that adults with reading problems tend to raise children with reading problems”. She thus founded the privately run Barbara Bush Foundation for Family Literacy.⁸² While Barbara herself didn’t make the connection, others identified her cause as being a “safe” and acceptable choice for the wife of an ambitious politician.⁸³ Later on she took a special interest in another cause, fighting against prejudice against those infected with AIDS. She took a stronger, more aggressive approach in promoting that cause, insisting on visiting a small health-care facility in Northwest Washington. This visit is said to have marked a turning point in public perceptions of AIDS victims. There she held a frail, black infant who had tested positive for AIDS. She allowed photographers to take their

⁷⁹ Same reference, 291.

⁸⁰ Same reference, 189.

⁸¹ Same reference, 179.

⁸² Barbara Gamarekian, “Barbara Bush Announces Formation of Literacy Foundation,” *New York Times*, March 7, 1989, accessed April 12, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/1989/03/07/us/barbara-bush-announces-formation-of-literacy-foundation.html>.

⁸³ Caroli, *First Ladies*, 288.

picture which was widely circulated and is said to have achieved its goal; showing that AIDS is not spread through casual contact and reducing fear about how easily the disease could be transmitted.⁸⁴

Following this discussion on Barbara Bush it can be argued that many of her traits are in line with those of a typical First Lady as previously outlined. First of all, her literacy cause could be considered to fall into the non-controversial category and her grandmotherly image rendered her warm, friendly and approachable. She took her role as a hostess seriously, advocated for her husband whenever the opportunity arose and was described as his strongest political asset. She symbolized American women to the world as “America’s grandmother” with the help of her image as an average homemaker. It can also be argued that she fits better into the mold of the typical First Lady than her successor, Hillary Clinton. A more in-depth analysis of Barbara will take place in the next chapter.

3.4 Hillary Clinton

When Bill Clinton announced his candidacy for President of the United States in 1992, Hillary Rodham Clinton was an accomplished lawyer and partner in a well-known law firm, graduate of both the prestigious Wellesley College and Yale Law School, First Lady of Arkansas, law professor and mother of one.⁸⁵ She moved into the White House on January 20th 1993 and it was widely speculated that she would rewrite the job of First Lady. Newspapers ran headlines trying to decipher what Hillary would do with her new role. On June 19th, 1993, the *National Journal* described her as the President’s “First Partner“ who was “breaking new ground“⁸⁶ and the *LA Times* claimed that if she succeeded she could "revolutionize the Role of First Lady" but if she failed "she could take the whole administration down with her."⁸⁷ Within months of her husband’s inauguration *Vanity Fair* outlined “A Hundred Days of Hillary” instead of the more traditional “the President’s First

⁸⁴ K.T. Walsh and J.M. Schrof, “The Hidden Life of Barbara Bush,” *U.S. News & World Report* 108, no. 21 (May 28, 1990): 24.

⁸⁵ Ann McGinley, “Hillary Clinton, Sarah Palin, and Michelle Obama: Performing gender, race, and class on the campaign trail,” *Denver University Law Review* 86 (2009): 715.

⁸⁶ Caroli, *First Ladies*, 294.

⁸⁷ David Lauter, “MRS. WONK GOES TO WASHINGTON : If Hillary Clinton Succeeds, She Could Revolutionize the Role of First Lady. If She Fails, She Could Take the Whole Administration Down With Her,” *LA Times*, May 23, 1993, accessed April 13, 2015, http://articles.latimes.com/1993-05-23/magazine/tm-38740_1_hillary-clinton.

One Hundred Days“.⁸⁸ During the inaugural festivities Hillary’s participation could be considered to have mirrored that of the most traditional First Ladies. Journalists wrote stories about the color of her daytime outfit and the color of her hat⁸⁹ but she soon made other kinds of headlines as she took an office in the West Wing of the White House, very close to the Oval office.⁹⁰ This was considered to be a symbolic move as it was placing her closer to the center of power than any other First Lady had done as they had always held an office in the East Wing.⁹¹

When the lives and careers of First Ladies are studied a trend emerges; most of them had less formal education than their husbands and few of them worked outside of the home after they got married. Hillary, however, is the first First Lady to hold a graduate degree and she has a similar educational background to her husband as both of them are lawyers. She was also a practicing attorney right until she moved into the White House, earning more money than her husband until his election as President and pursuing an independent career as her husband built his political base.⁹² As Hillary Clinton was born in 1947, merely one year after Barbara Bush’s oldest child was born, she grew up in different times than her predecessor. Barbara, whose choices could be considered to have been defined by her husband’s job and her children’s needs, dropped out of college and never held a full-time job. Hillary chose a different path as she began her career first and later fit her family around it. The birth of her daughter, Chelsea, in 1980 did not set her career off path and like many other women of Hillary’s generation she learned to juggle managing her household, a stressful job and being a mother.⁹³ In light of these characteristics the two women have been described as quintessential examples of women of their time and class.⁹⁴

It has been argued that Hillary had a strong influence on her husband’s presidency as well as the election campaign. She is said to be her husband’s most trusted political

⁸⁸ Caroli, *First Ladies*, 294.

⁸⁹ Anne-Marie Schiro, “SETTLING IN: The Fashion Scene; A Blue Hat Has Critics Wondering,” *New York Times*, January 22, 1993, accessed April 13, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/1993/01/22/us/settling-in-the-fashion-scene-a-blue-hat-has-critics-wondering.html>.

⁹⁰ Robert Pear, “SETTLING IN: FIRST LADY; Hillary Clinton Gets Policy Job And New Office,” *New York Times*, January 22, 1993, accessed April 13, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/1993/01/22/us/settling-in-first-lady-hillary-clinton-gets-policy-job-and-new-office.html>.

⁹¹ Caroli, *First Ladies*, 309.

⁹² O’Connor, Nye and Assendelft, *Wives in the White House*, 838.

⁹³ Caroli, *First Ladies*, 303.

⁹⁴ Caroli, *First Ladies*, 295

confidante and has been given credit as a major force behind his successful political career.⁹⁵ She could be considered a major part of his campaign team, both when he was running for governor of Arkansas as well as in his presidential campaign. She formulated policy ideas and reviewed candidates for her husband's staff and increasingly his staff would bear her mark – to the point where it became impossible to clearly discern where the influence of one Clinton began and the other ended.⁹⁶ The principal deputies of the presidential campaign knew that Hillary sometimes spoke for Bill and that his words were often hers.⁹⁷ Bill joked about voters getting “two for the price of one” if he was elected, thus cementing Hillary's involvement in the presidency.⁹⁸

Another indicator of Hillary's involvement in the presidency came when Bill asked her to head the Clinton administration's Task Force on National Health Care Reforms. This was something he had made central to his campaign and was an enormous task as roughly one seventh of the nation's gross domestic spending went toward health care. This was the first time a First Lady led such a major reform as any proposals her commission reached would inflict changes far wider than the reforms led by previous First Ladies.⁹⁹ For example Lady Bird Johnson's highway beautification law that passed in 1965 and called for control of outdoor advertising along the US highways as well as curbing junkyards along the nation's roads.¹⁰⁰ It was also bigger than Rosalynn Carter's mental health care reform which was the first presidentially mandated commission examining the mental health needs and policies of the United States.¹⁰¹ Her role in the task force was also a far cry from the traditional First Lady causes, such as Barbara's literacy program or Nancy Reagan's “just say no to drugs”.¹⁰² This pioneering act proved to be controversial as Hillary's involvement in influencing policy provoked strong public reaction and resulted in plummeting approval ratings for the First Lady in public opinion polls.

⁹⁵ Robert P. Watson, “A Review Essay: Hillary's Legacy? Recent Literature on the First Lady,” *The Social Science Journal* 37, no. 4 (2000): 654.

⁹⁶ Carl Bernstein, *A Woman in Charge* (New York: Vintage, 2008), 141.

⁹⁷ Same reference, 191.

⁹⁸ Sulfaro, *Affective Evaluations*, 489.

⁹⁹ Caroli, *First Ladies*, 309-310.

¹⁰⁰ L. L. Gould, “First Lady as Catalyst: Lady Bird Johnson and Highway Beautification in the 1960s,” *Environmental Review* 10, no. 2 (07, 1986): 78.

¹⁰¹ Rebecca G. Palpant et al., “The Carter Center Mental Health Program: Addressing the Public Health Crisis in the Field of Mental Health through Policy Change and Stigma Reduction,” *Preventing Chronic Disease* 3, no. 2 (04, 2006): 3.

¹⁰² Caroli, *First Ladies*, 309-310.

After the health care debacle she kept a lower profile as a policy advisor. She consciously made the decision to focus her advocacy on more traditional women's issues, such as women's health and child rearing,¹⁰³ and confined her activity to the traditional role as White House hostess. She also kept herself visible internationally as a goodwill ambassador and worked on the rights and economic problems of women globally.¹⁰⁴ Her approval rating steadily increased with numbers going from as low as 43% in 1995 to staying at around 60-67% throughout March 1999. Thus it can be argued that she was rewarded for staying within what are considered acceptable female roles which are created in accordance to gender norms that were previously discussed in the thesis.¹⁰⁵

Hillary's relationship with the media could be considered as being strained at times. In reporter's coverage of the primaries they appeared uncertain of what exactly they should write. While certain reporters focused on her hair style and clothes as they would normally do for a candidate's wife, others focused on her record as if she was running in her own name.¹⁰⁶ Hillary held a certain sense of privacy over her personal life that spilled over into public reminders of her domestic role. She was often criticized for being too private and her image as a mother was hard to reinforce by media as pictures and articles about Chelsea were off limits for a long time. As the family living quarters were off-limits to all reporters, journalists also found it hard to define and reinforce her traditional feminine roles.¹⁰⁷ This could in part be explained by the "shared-career" or "co-career" marriage the Clintons seemed to have instead of the more common dual-income family or even the traditional single-income family with a stay-at-home spouse. It has been argued that in their marriage one did not simply support the other's career as Bill Clinton's career blended and benefitted from Hillary's full participation in it, thus blurring the line between traditional gender roles.¹⁰⁸

In an effort to dispute accusations of being too private, Hillary sat in a press conference in April of 1994 for 66 minutes and answered questions about the Whitewater

¹⁰³ O'Connor, Nye and Assendelft, *Wives in the White House*, 847.

¹⁰⁴ Barbara C. Burrell, "Hillary Rodham Clinton as First Lady: The People's Perspective," *The Social Science Journal* 37, no. 4 (2000): 530.

¹⁰⁵ American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, *Public Opinion on Hillary Clinton, 1992-2015* (AEI Public Opinion Studies, 2015), 3-4.

¹⁰⁶ Caroli, *First Ladies*, 307-308.

¹⁰⁷ Betty Houchin Winfield, "The Making of an Image: Hillary Rodham Clinton and American Journalists," *Political Communication* 14.2 (4, 1997): 246.

¹⁰⁸ Watson, *Hillary's Legacy?*, 655.

scandal, a failed real estate deal the Clintons were a part of in Arkansas which later turned into accusations of fraud, obstruction of justice and abuse of power.¹⁰⁹ Hillary dressed in a pink suit and expressed regret for not being forthcoming to the public. The pink suit was read as being a deliberate maneuver to underline her innocence and femininity and an effort to settle into her proper place as a woman, apologetic and humble.¹¹⁰

The status of the First Lady was tested in a new way during Hillary's time as First Lady. Physicians who wanted to participate in hearings of the Task Force on Health Care Reform, fronted by the First Lady, were not happy about being barred from the meeting on the grounds that the commission was formed of "government officials". The physicians protested this reasoning, claiming that the First Lady was not a government official and the commission's meetings should be open to the public as long as she chaired it. Judge Royce C. Lamberth ruled at first that the commission's chair was not a "government official" and thus the meetings must be open to the public. The ruling was reversed by a federal appeals court which accepted that there existed "a longstanding tradition of public service by First Ladies...who have acted (albeit in the background) as advisers and personal representative of their husbands."¹¹¹ This is the first ruling on the position of the First Lady and although opinions differ on the legitimacy of this verdict it shows that Hillary's actions brought a new discussion on the legal definition of the First Lady's role.

Hillary Clinton had to overcome many hurdles in her time as First Lady with her husband's affair with Monica Lewinsky being one of them. Public opinion on Hillary changed once again as the public now viewed her as the "wronged woman". At the same time she was also criticized for remaining married to a man that exposed her to such humiliation. It was suggested that she stayed in the marriage to satisfy her own immense personal ambition and to preserve her connection to the power center of the nation. Supporters of the First Lady expressed concern that the strong, independent First Lady they had come to know had been reduced to the role of "loyal wife". This was a label she herself had rejected with fervor

¹⁰⁹ "Untangling Whitewater," Washington Post, accessed April 18, 2015, www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/special/whitewater/whitewater.htm.

¹¹⁰ Robin Givhan, "Winning Flush," *Washington Post*, February 17, 2006, accessed April 18, 2015, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/02/16/AR2006021602305.html>.

¹¹¹ Robert Pear, "Court Rules That First Lady Is 'De Facto' Federal Official," *New York Times*, June 23, 1993, accessed April 18, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/1993/06/23/us/court-rules-that-first-lady-is-de-facto-federal-official.html>.

during the 1992 presidential campaign in an interview with 60 Minutes on January 26th, declaring that she was not “sitting here like some little woman standing by my man like Tammy Wynette.”^{112 113}

When Hillary announced that she would run for Senate in 2000 she initiated a new chapter in First Lady history. She was the first First Lady to use her vantage point as a presidential spouse to launch her own election campaign. This resulted in new criticism in the form of accusations of taking advantage of White House perks to advance her senate race. Voters did not seem to take these criticisms to heart and Hillary celebrated her victory in 2001.¹¹⁴ In 2007 she initiated yet another chapter in First Lady history and launched a 2008 presidential campaign. Her loss did not deter her and in 2015 she announced a second try at the presidency. This will however not be discussed further as this thesis only focuses on Hillary’s role as First Lady.

It could prove more difficult to associate Hillary with most of the characteristics of a typical First Lady than her predecessor Barbara Bush. It can however be argued that Hillary represented American women to the world as she has been described as the quintessential example of a woman of her time and class. She was also a definite fixture on the campaign trail, vocally supportive and traveled with her husband. She was described as his most trusted political confidante so she does fit in the “supportive helpmate” category. However, it could be argued that she took the “spokesperson” role too far as she sometimes spoke for him and his words were often hers. It could also be argued that she was not particularly warm, friendly nor approachable as she was very private and kept the press at an arms distance. Hillary Clinton can be seen as not naturally assuming the traditional feminine role but rather consciously making an effort to win voter’s affection by focusing on what were considered appropriate “feminine issues”. Instead of picking up a noncontroversial cause she headed the health care task force and it could be argued that she went too far in influencing the President by aiding in the formulation of policy ideas and reviewing options for his staff. While Barbara Bush was at one end of the spectrum, embodying a greater number of the characteristics of a typical First Lady, Hillary was at the other bringing new challenges to those trying to define the role. It could be argued that Michelle Obama would fit somewhere in the middle, a career

¹¹² Tammy Wynette is the singer and songwriter of the song “Stand by Your Man.”

¹¹³ Hillary Clinton and Bill Clinton, interview with Steve Kroft, *60 Minutes*, CBS, January 26, 1992.

¹¹⁴ Caroli, *First Ladies*, 317-318.

woman much like Hillary yet defining herself as a “mom-in-chief” which fits better with the “America’s grandmother” identity of Barbara Bush. These subjects will be analyzed further in the next chapter.

3.5 Michelle Obama

In January of 2009 Michelle Obama became the first African-American First Lady as her husband, Barack Obama, was inaugurated as President of the United States. The family of four marked history not only for being the first African-American First Family but also for moving in a First Grandmother, Michelle’s mother, to help raise their two daughters, Sasha and Malia.¹¹⁵

It could be argued that Hillary Clinton and Michelle Obama share certain traits such as both being accomplished career women and lawyers. Unlike Hillary there was less attention paid to Michelle Obama’s career success during the presidential campaign which may indicate that the American public could be more comfortable with successful career women today than it was when Bill Clinton ran for office.¹¹⁶ This is in accordance with social constructivism which argues that as society changes so do social norms. Thus as successful career women become the norm it in turn becomes acceptable for First Ladies to have successful careers.

Race was foreseeingly a big issue in Barack Obama’s presidential campaign and racial politics did not exclude his wife. Michelle Obama has been said to be too critical of her husband as she has expressed her ambivalence about his running for the presidency, openly discussed times where there was tension in their marriage because of his schedule and said that he had morning breath, snored and left his dirty socks on the floor.¹¹⁷ She has also been criticized and labelled as an “angry black woman” as a result of her outspokenness and remarks during her husband’s presidential race where she claimed that she finally felt proud of her country for the first time in her adult life.¹¹⁸ Some people had problems with reconciling her “anger” with what was perceived as an especially privileged life and her

¹¹⁵ Krissah Thompson and Juliet Eilperin, “The elusive Mrs. R.: Marian Robinson, the White House’s not-so-typical live-in grandma,” *Washington Post*, March 31, 2014, accessed April 13, 2015, http://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/the-elusive-mrs-r-marian-robinson-the-white-houses-not-so-typical-live-in-grandma/2014/03/31/72f7547a-b6c1-11e3-a7c6-70cf2db17781_story.html.

¹¹⁶ McGinley, *Performing gender, race and class*, 722.

¹¹⁷ Same reference, 722.

¹¹⁸ Caroli, *First Ladies*, 352.

campaign opponents were characterized as depicting her as an “unpatriotic, angry black woman nursing racial grievances despite her successful life story”.¹¹⁹ She has also been accused of lacking gratitude to the country and having no right to criticize it.¹²⁰

Her public opinion poll ratings were extremely low, hovering around 43% in 2008, showing that despite Barack Obama clinching the Democratic nomination and being the presidential frontrunner in June of 2008, Americans still had reservations about his wife. Something had to be done as these numbers were troubling for the campaign; thus the image rehabilitation of Michelle began. She deliberately appeared in affordable outfits from stores such as J. Crew that working women across the country habitually wear¹²¹, danced on the popular television show *Ellen* and joined the band *Jonas Brothers* in a skit. She sidestepped controversy, emphasized her role as a mother as she began calling herself “mom-in-chief”¹²² and in return the public rewarded her. Her public opinion ratings soared, rising to 72%, even surpassed her husband’s at a time and have stayed at a steady 66% since 2010.¹²³

Despite these criticisms Michelle could be considered a strong advocate for her husband. She compared his family to her own, showing the similarities between her working class family from the South Side of Chicago to his more exotic background as half Kenyan and raised in Indonesia and Hawaii.¹²⁴ She insisted that Barack had a lot in common with her family who emphasized the importance of hard work, holding to promises that were made and the importance of treating everyone with dignity and respect. It can be argued that she helped render their family ordinary and her husband “just like” other Americans by talking about how they, too, struggled to pay off their student loans in the years before she started working at the hospital and Barack became a senator.¹²⁵

¹¹⁹ Maria Puente, “What Kind of First Lady Will Michelle Obama be?,” *USA Today*, December 18, 2008, accessed April 10, 2015, http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/life/people/2008-12-18-michelleobama-firstlady_N.htm.

¹²⁰ Stuart Taylor Jr., “Obama’s wife and Their Spiritual Adviser,” *National Journal*, April 5, 2008, accessed April 10, 2015, <http://www.nationaljournal.com/magazine/obama-s-wife-and-their-spiritual-adviser-20080405>.

¹²¹ Caroli, *First Ladies*, 354.

¹²² Robin Givhan, “Michelle: Her First Year as First Lady' excerpt: The mom-in-chief effect,” *Washington Post*, January 17, 2010, accessed April 10, 2015, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/01/14/AR2010011405324.html>.

¹²³ Alyssa Brown, “Michelle Obama Maintains Positive Image: Average Favorable Rating Tops Hillary Clinton's as First Lady,” *Gallup*, March 3, 2014, accessed April 10, 2015, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/167696/michelle-obama-maintains-positive-image.aspx>.

¹²⁴ Brian Naylor, “Michelle Obama Stresses Barack’s American Values,” *NPR*, August 26, 2008, accessed April 12, 2015, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=93959664>.

¹²⁵ Caroli, *First Ladies*, 352.

Her self-described role as “mom-in-chief” could be considered a strong characteristic of Michelle. She claims that raising her children is a full-time job and her first priority, emphasizing her focus on family and noncontroversial matters. It can be argued that this public emphasis on motherhood is strategic and serves the purpose to lend credibility to her image and demystify her racial heritage as motherhood is a universal occupation that people of any race can relate to. In interviews she puts emphasis on her family, frequently talking about what effect living in the White House has on them or suggesting that her family is no different than other American families. She does this by discussing how they eat dinner as a family and spend more time together than they have in years after moving to the White House. She has openly discussed how she raises her two daughters, claiming that they are treated like normal children and not “little princesses”. They are told to make their bed, clean their plates and they help set the table and bring food out.¹²⁶ Her outspokenness about her family has created a portrayal of the First Family as not being too different from the average middle-class family. By doing this she has helped create a bond between the average American and the First Family. These actions have also played a part in reinforcing her image as a mother which is something she seems to put great emphasis on.

Like most First Ladies Michelle chose a cause to promote during her time as First Lady. The cause she chose was the *Let's Move* campaign to fight against childhood obesity, claiming that “the physical and emotional health of an entire generation and the economic health and security of our nation is at stake”.¹²⁷ Michelle, like her husband, has used social media and the entertainment world to promote both herself, her husband and her *Let's Move* cause. She routinely appears on the television show *Ellen* and various talk shows, even guest starring on the popular comedy show *Parks and Recreation*.¹²⁸ She recently appeared on *The Tonight Show with Jimmy Fallon* and participated in a skit called “The Evolution of Mom

¹²⁶ Lauren McComb, “Oprah Talks to Michelle Obama,” *O, The Oprah Magazine*, July 2011, accessed April 11, 2015, <http://www.oprahmag.co.za/live-your-best-life/giving-back/oprah-talks-to-michelle-obama>.

¹²⁷ The White House: Office of the First Lady, “First Lady Michelle Obama Launches Let's Move: America's Move to Raise a Healthier Generation of Kids,” statement, February 9, 2010, accessed April 11, 2015, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/first-lady-michelle-obama-launches-lets-move-americas-move-raise-a-healthier-genera>.

¹²⁸ Danielle Henderson, “Parks and Recreation's cameos: how does Michelle Obama measure up?,” *The Guardian*, April 25, 2014, accessed April 11, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2014/apr/25/parks-and-recreation-michelle-obama-cameos>.

Dancing Part 2”.¹²⁹ Her participation in this particular skit indicates that her image as a mother and her *Let’s Move* campaign involving exercise is intertwined and can be viewed as a strong identifying feature of hers.

With the use of social media and the entertainment world it can be argued that Michelle Obama has participated in bringing the First Lady role to a certain celebrity status. She may not be the first one to do so, Jackie Kennedy for instance was idolized by many and covered in many magazines, but it has arguably not been done before to this extent. As well as appearing on television shows she has been on the cover of *Glamour*, a magazine dedicated to young women interested in fashion, beauty and a contemporary lifestyle.¹³⁰ She has also travelled to Tokyo with the famous YouTube beauty guru Michelle Phan for her *Let girls learn* campaign to expand access to education for adolescent girls around the world.¹³¹ She even helped create a hip-hop album as a part of the *Let’s Move* campaign.¹³² Perhaps this celebrity status can be credited to the extensive reach of modern technology and social media that was not available in the past. It could however be argued that Michelle has made a point of using it to its fullest potential.

The press has extensively covered Michelle’s wardrobe, giving her the nick name “First Lady of Fashion and Style”¹³³. Her style of bold prints and sleeveless tops and dresses that showcase her toned arms has both drawn attention and criticisms as it has frequently been considered inappropriate.¹³⁴ Her style can therefore be considered to play some part in accusations of not looking or acting the part of a First Lady. However it could be argued that

¹²⁹ Hunter Schwarz, “Michelle Obama and Jimmy Fallon Did the ‘Evolution of Mom Dancing Part 2’,” *Washington Post*, April 3, 2015, accessed April 11, 2015, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/the-fix/wp/2015/04/03/michelle-obama-and-jimmy-fallon-did-the-evolution-of-mom-dancing-part-2/>.

¹³⁰ Erin C.J. Robertson, “An unlikely trio: Michelle Obama, Kerry Washington and Sarah Jessica Parker on May 2015 Glamour cover,” *Washington Post*, April 7, 2015, accessed April 11, 2015, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/reliable-source/wp/2015/04/07/an-unlikely-trio-michelle-obama-kerry-washington-and-sarah-jessica-parker-on-the-may-2015-cover-of-glamour/>.

¹³¹ Alicia Rancilio, “YouTube star Michelle Phan branches out with ICON network,” *Washington Post*, April 6, 2015, accessed April 11, 2015, http://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/tv/youtube-star-michelle-phan-branches-out-with-icon-network/2015/04/06/89d9f97c-dc8b-11e4-b6d7-b9bc8acf16f7_story.html.

¹³² Hadas Gold, “Michelle Obama releasing rap album (but she doesn’t sing),” *Politico*, August 13, 2013, accessed April 11, 2015, <http://www.politico.com/politico44/2013/08/michelle-obama-releasing-rap-album-but-she-doesnt-170422.html>.

¹³³ Robin Givhan, “First lady of fashion: Michelle Obama leads A-list style workshop at White House,” *National Post*, October 9, 2014, accessed April 11, 2015, <http://news.nationalpost.com/life/style/first-lady-of-fashion-michelle-obama-leads-a-list-style-workshop-at-white-house>.

¹³⁴ Wendy Donahue, “Some harrumph over Michelle Obama’s sleeveless dress,” *Chicago Tribune*, February 26, 2009, accessed April 11, 2015, http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2009-02-26/entertainment/0902250692_1_dress-michelle-obama-arms.

race is also a factor as the color of her skin deviates her from past First Ladies. Despite these criticisms the First Lady seems to use fashion for other purposes than merely to look good. In her recent trip to Asia to promote the *Let Girls Learn* campaign she wore traditional feminine clothing that some have described as intentionally “girly”. It has been speculated that this was a conscious decision to signal that femininity and power can go together and are not at odds.¹³⁵

In light of this brief overview of Michelle Obama’s time as First Lady it can be argued that she welcomed the traditional feminine role and played up her identity as a mother. Her *Let’s Move* cause against childhood obesity can be considered to be noncontroversial and she has used her own family history to make Barack Obama more relatable and advocated for him as a valid choice for President. She took measures to be more approachable, opting for inexpensive J. Crew outfits when needing to score higher public opinion ratings and reinforcing her role as a mom. By appearing on various talk shows, magazines and sitcoms as well as openly discussing times of trouble in her marriage she consciously made herself appear friendly and approachable. These actions could also be considered to have given the role of First Lady a certain celebrity status. Thus Michelle, much like Hillary, has brought a new dimension to the role of First Lady. Further analysis will take place in the next chapter where the First Lady’s role will be discussed as well as each example’s take on the role will be analyzed.

¹³⁵ Vanessa Friedman, “For Michelle Obama, Girlie Clothes That Lean In,” *New York Times*, March 24, 2015, accessed April 10, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/26/fashion/for-michelle-obama-girlie-clothes-that-lean-in.html?ref=topics>.

4 Discussion

This thesis set out to shed light on the contemporary role of the First Lady of the United States of America and to identify the characteristics of a typical First Lady. To identify these characteristics academic research and media discourse surrounding the First Ladies was examined as well as former First Ladies' remarks regarding the role and their behavior whilst serving as First Lady. With the examination of these sources this thesis argues that the characteristics of the typical First Lady have been constructed as follows: She is an official hostess of the White House and the nation itself. She represents American women to the world and is warm, friendly, approachable, classy and modest both in attire and behavior. The First Lady gives up her job once moving into the White House and assumes the traditional feminine role, standing by her man. She is first and foremost a supportive helpmate advocating for her husband as well as being a fixture on the campaign trail where she travels with her husband and is vocally supportive and appears in campaign ads for him. She is a spokesperson for her husband, advocating his agenda and serves as a validator as to why people should support him. She should not go too far in influencing the President but she is expected to promote noncontroversial, charitable causes. However the characteristics listed above are not set in stone as they are constantly changing and evolving to a certain extent. This is a process that is in association with gender norms that dictate what acceptable female and male behavior is at any given time. By examining the research material this thesis used the characteristics listed seem to be the most prevailing and difficult to change.

This thesis also argued that the typical characteristics are created in relation to gender norms which have previously been defined as norms that provide "instruction" for how men and women are supposed to act, think and feel as well as constrain men and women from certain behaviors that are "off limits". Norms that have been linked to femininity have been defined as being nice, attractive, domestic and silent as well as focusing on relationships, nurturing others, and deferring to men to name a few. It can be argued that the characteristics listed above procure an image of a submissive wife that stands by her man and doesn't go out of line by disagreeing with him publicly. The typical characteristics could be closely linked to several feminine norms. Being nice can be connected to the warm, friendly and approachable characteristic while the "be attractive" norm fits in with the classy and modest both in attire and behavior characteristic. When she is being a supportive helpmate she is being nurturing to her husband and when she plays the role of hostess she is conforming to the domestic norm.

She should not go too far in influencing the President and give up her job which can be associated with the “be silent” and “defer to men” norms.¹³⁶

Furthermore, this thesis argued that even though there are certain typical characteristics that have proven to be associated with the female spouse of the President, the role of the First Lady is ever-changing and the characteristics are not fixed but rather evolve with time and society to a certain extent. This is in accordance with the fact no set rules or guidelines exist, or have existed, for the First Lady. Instead rules of behavior and action for the First Lady started to emerge from expectations from the public guided by social norms. This argument can be supported by the theoretical framework that was created in this thesis which argued that social norms control what is considered acceptable behavior at each period in time. The role of the First Lady expanded from merely being a ceremonial hostess during the time of Martha Washington and Elizabeth Monroe to being an independent persona influencing policies and taking a more active approach in later times. According to social constructivism the world is composed socially and there are no absolute values. As time changes acceptable behavior of the First Lady changes with it. It could be argued that the characteristics of the typical First Lady are what they are because they developed over a long period of time where the traditional feminine role consisted of letting the husband provide for the family while the wife stayed at home with the children. Norms are also socially constructed and provide a framework regarding what is considered acceptable behavior in each society and time period. This includes gender norms, i.e. what is considered to be acceptable female and male behavior.

Although the role of the First Lady expanded from merely being a ceremonial hostess that does not mean that she no longer plays that role. Gender norms see to that the First Lady is still defined and limited within this acceptable behavior and she is punished by the public, as seen in public opinion polls, when she steps too far out of them. In Western popular culture examples of acceptable behavior for a woman are being caring, nurturing and feminine. In that sense the typical First Lady is supposed to be warm, friendly, approachable and feminine. If her public opinion ratings are low she is advised to make herself appear more feminine and approachable; as Butler would say she needs to perform her gender. This is a method that has proven to work as is evidenced by both the actions of Hillary Clinton and Michelle Obama.

¹³⁶ Mahalik et al., *Feminine norms*, 418.

When she needed to boost her opinion poll ratings Michelle emphasized her role as a mother and coined the title “mom-in-chief” for herself. When Hillary needed to boost her ratings as a result of the controversy following her part in the Task Force on National Health Care Reforms she confined herself to acceptable female roles and in turn was rewarded with higher ratings as discussed in the previous chapter.

It is important to realize that the social norms discussed in the theoretical framework aid in the creation of the stereotype that is the typical First Lady. A stereotype is formed when people make extreme trait and evaluative judgments of a group, even on the basis of very little information about a particular member of the group. Few simple, vivid, memorable, easily grasped and widely recognized characteristics about First Ladies are taken and the typical First Lady is reduced to those traits. They are the result of norms in society and define what the typical First Lady is like, how she should behave and how she should look. What does not fit in with the stereotypical, socially accepted and created characteristics of the First Lady can be put into the “other” category. This is in accordance to the discussion on the “other”. Everything that is considered abnormal, not stereotypical or socially accepted is in that category. The normal characteristics are thus advocating for her husband, being a spokesperson, acting as a hostess etc. and what is abnormal is going too far outside of accepted roles for the First Lady such as heading the health care task force. When Hillary took that role she placed herself as a First Lady in the “other” category and distanced herself from other First Ladies.

4.1 How typical? Barbara Bush, Hillary Clinton and Michelle Obama

In light of the previous discussion to what extent can the typical characteristics be applied to the examples provided in the thesis? It can be argued that many of the characteristics of the typical First Lady apply to Barbara Bush. With her grandmotherly image she rendered herself warm, friendly and approachable. She was one of the most popular First Ladies, which is evidenced by *People* magazine deciding to put her on the cover for the first time after the 1988 election. Much to the editors’ surprise the issue was one of the best sellers of the year.¹³⁷

She was classy and modest in attire, wearing her fake pearls proudly. She was mostly modest in behavior as well, occasionally slipping up as she did when quoted about Geraldine

¹³⁷ Page, *Why America Loves Barbara Bush*.

Ferraro. She was also modest about her involvement in the success of George's political career and downplayed her involvement into a mere hostess role. With her response to the bonbon comment she showed that she never missed the opportunity of being a spokesperson for George, advocating for him whenever she could and validating why people should support him. This is something that could be viewed as being in line with the actions of the "submissive wife". She seemed to avoid going too far in influencing the President and avoided putting her views on abortion and gun control laws on public record as she was believed to hold differing views to her husband's. This, however, does not mean that there were not times where she did not have something to do with the decisions he made as evidenced by her involvement in certain political appointments.

Barbara was of a generation where it was considered normal for women not to have a paid job so it was not abnormal that she did not have a job to give up once moving to the White House. She is considered to be the symbol of traditional wifeliness, assuming the traditional feminine role. She admitted that the division of labor in the Bush household was clearly divided by the traditional lines of what was considered woman's work and man's work. This division of what is considered "his" and "hers" that was present in the Bush household reinforced the notion that Barbara was comfortable with confining herself to the feminine role.

The cause Barbara Bush decided to advocate for was literacy; a cause that undoubtedly fits the non-controversial, charitable category. Her choice was identified as being a safe and acceptable choice for a First Lady and was in line with the rest of Barbara's characteristics as a First Lady. Out of the three examples it can be argued that Barbara Bush embodies the greatest number of typical characteristics which could be explained by the fact that she grew up in a time where these gender roles were enforced, e.g. school was just a waiting game to find a husband to provide for her and once she did she didn't finish her studies.

It is much harder to fit Hillary Clinton into the mold of the typical First Lady. While Barbara Bush can be considered to symbolize the traditional, homemaker wife Hillary Clinton could be situated at the opposite end of the spectrum. She was a driven career woman that had the same education as her husband but made more money than him before he was elected as President. While she did give up her job once moving to the White House it could be argued that she found another one as head of the Task Force on Health Care Reform as previously discussed. This was highly controversial as, unlike most First Ladies, she did not choose a traditional charitable, noncontroversial cause but rather headed a government task force.

Instead of settling naturally into the traditional feminine role she consciously took actions to seem more feminine to please the public. When needing to raise her opinion poll rates she confined her advocacy to acceptable female issues and focused her attention on her role as the White House hostess. The “Pink Press Conference” was also considered to be an act to make her look more approachable, vulnerable and feminine. The press did not know what to make of her as she was a very private person and got criticized for that. Pictures of Chelsea were off limits for a long time as were the family living quarters so there were no images to reinforce her role as a mother to the public nor her traditional female role. If the press could not report on it, the public did not see it. In an effort to emphasize her domesticity she allowed for then twelve-year old Chelsea to appear before cameras and be featured in *People* magazine. With this she consciously underscored her role as a mother.¹³⁸

While Hillary did not confine her role to just being a supportive helpmate advocating for her husband she was also a major force behind the success of her husband’s political career and his most trusted confidante. Critics may say that she took her role as spokesperson too far as she often spoke for him and his words were often hers. She was not only a fixture on the campaign trail, appearing in campaign ads and traveling with the campaign team, she was also a major part of said team. She formulated policy ideas and reviewed candidates for her husband’s staff. Bill Clinton did not try to hide the extent of her involvement and openly said that she advised him on cabinet appointments in 1993, something she had done for “every other decision I’ve made in the last 20 years”.¹³⁹ For these reasons it could be said that she was much more involved than former First Ladies had been and could be interpreted as going too far in influencing the President.

It could be argued that Hillary’s foray into the senate cemented her status as a truly non-traditional First Lady as no First Lady had done this before. This is in line with her label as a polarizing First Lady, bringing new dimensions to the role and opening it up for further political activity by future First Ladies. It is worth noting that Hillary has stretched the limits of First Lady political activity further than any of her predecessors by running for President not once, but twice. This will however not be discussed further as it is only her time as First Lady that is up for review in this thesis.

¹³⁸ Caroli, *First Ladies*, 308.

¹³⁹ Gwen Ifill, “Clinton Wants Wife at Cabinet Table,” *New York Times*, December 19, 1992, accessed April 28, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/1992/12/19/us/clinton-wants-wife-at-cabinet-table.html>.

Michelle could also be considered a non-traditional First Lady as race alone renders her outside of the typical First Lady category. She had to deal with different criticism than any other First Lady before her as they have all been white. An example of this is the reaction she invoked by saying she was finally proud of her country for the first time in her life. As a result she was quickly labelled as an “angry black woman”. Something that would most likely have been labelled as unpatriotic and offensive to the American people if said by a white First Lady was turned into a racial stereotype of the “angry black woman” simply because of the color of her skin. In addition to this criticism she was also accused of lacking gratitude to the country which had a part in her extremely low public opinion poll ratings. Michelle, or at least her advisors, had learned from Hillary Clinton’s time as First Lady and took similar measures to boost her ratings. Like Hillary, Michelle took to appealing to working mom’s across the country, wearing affordable outfits and emphasizing her role as a mother by referring to herself as “mom-in-chief”.

Michelle fits in with the supportive helpmate/spokesperson advocating for her husband category as she took it upon herself to make Barack more relatable to the American people. The public had reservations about him, presumably because he is half Kenyan, and it was Michelle’s job to diminish those reservations. She did this by mixing her own all American background with his more international one and showing the public that even if he was half Kenyan and partly raised in Indonesia he was not that different from the average American. She also took steps to render her family more relatable by bringing up the Obama’s trouble paying their student loans, something many Americans could relate to.

The emphasis she placed on her role as a mom and the act of openly discussing times of trouble in her marriage helped create an image of a warm and approachable woman – just a normal mom. By moving in her mother to help raise their two daughters she reinforced the idea that the Obama’s were a close family that followed American values and her affordable wardrobe helped Michelle connect herself with working women across the country. In other words; Michelle consciously made herself seem approachable and friendly. She drew up a portrayal of herself and her family as not too different from the average middle class family that ate dinner together and the kids helped with chores. She gave up her job as a lawyer once moving into the White House and assumed the traditional feminine role of being a mother first and foremost. As was argued in this thesis this emphasis on motherhood can be construed as a strategic effort to lend credibility to Michelle’s image as First Lady and demystify her racial heritage as motherhood is universal and not specific to any race.

She did get her fair share of criticism over her wardrobe choice. Although she was given the nick name “First Lady of Fashion and Style” by some, others considered her style inappropriate for a First Lady which resulted in accusations of not looking or acting the part of a First Lady. This can be interpreted as criticism against her style or even the fact that Michelle Obama is an African-American First Lady in a sea of White First Ladies and as such she deviates from the norm.

In spite of these criticisms Michelle seems to have been bringing the First Lady role to a certain celebrity status, e.g. her multiple appearances on magazine covers, sitcoms and talk shows. In a poll held in 2011 by *BizBash*, an online resource hub for event planners, Michelle Obama was chosen by 25% of its readers as their “top choice to walk the red carpet in an event”. She scored higher than celebrities such as Angelina Jolie, Lady Gaga and James Franco as well as politicians such as Sarah Palin and even Bill Clinton.¹⁴⁰ She is using her status as First Lady to reach out to a younger audience that looks up to celebrities. She even helped creating a hip-hop album as a part of the cause she has chosen to advocate for, the *Let’s Move* campaign against childhood obesity. This cause can be considered to fit in with the traditional noncontroversial causes of most other First Ladies. Michelle, however, approaches her role as advocator in a new way, using her celebrity status as a tool to promote her cause. She appears on talk shows where she dances and enforces her status as a physically healthy mom as can be seen in her appearance on Jimmy Fallon’s “Evolution of Mom Dancing Part 2” skit. She combines her Ivy League background with her role as a mom, First Lady and advocator in one and thus represents a middle ground between the traditional wife and homemaker that can be found in Barbara and the well-educated activist that can be found in Hillary.

By examining these three examples it can be argued that Barbara Bush and Hillary Clinton could be considered to stand at opposite ends of a spectrum. Barbara has been described as the quintessential example of the traditional stay at home, stand by your man wife that is first and foremost a homemaker and a mother. Hillary stands at the opposite end, a career driven woman that is well educated and stands on her own. Michelle could be placed somewhere in the middle, a career woman much like Hillary yet she puts great emphasis on

¹⁴⁰ “BizBash Poll Unveils Michelle Obama as Ideal Red-Carpet Celebrity for 2011,” *Entertainment Close - Up* (Jan 05, 2011).

her role as a mother. It could be argued that Michelle had learned from Hillary's mistakes as Hillary was criticized for being too private and not showing her feminine side. Michelle has also been said to be more comfortable with her femininity and more open about her role as a mother than Hillary Clinton was. This could be credited to the fact that Hillary belongs to a generation older than Michelle's and may have felt an anxiety to prove herself as a professional. This is something that is less common with younger women today as the public has grown accustomed to strong, career oriented women.¹⁴¹

The theoretical framework along with the examination of the research materials and the examples presented in this thesis provided an overview of what is expected of the First Lady of the United States of America. Social and gender norms can be considered a key factor in managing these expectations. These norms change with time and society but it is a slow process; once a stereotype has been established it can be hard to redefine the traits that embody said stereotype. Femininity seems to be a key factor in the creation of the First Lady stereotype which can be evidenced by the fact that both Hillary Clinton and Michelle Obama were rewarded when they showcased their femininity. In efforts to raise their public opinion ratings they consciously took measures to stay within acceptable feminine roles and were rewarded with higher ratings. Furthermore this shows that the traditional feminine role is also prominent in the discussion of acceptable First Lady behavior. This could mean that although times are changing and the public is getting used to stronger, career oriented women the traditional female role is still strong in the minds of the American people.

¹⁴¹ McGinley, *Performing Gender, Race, and Class*, 722.

5 Conclusion

The aim of this thesis was to shed light on the contemporary role of the First Lady of the United States of America and to identify the characteristics of a typical First Lady. This thesis argued that the role of the First Lady is ever-changing to a certain extent and the characteristics of a typical First Lady are in fact not fixed but evolve with time and society. Furthermore it was argued that these characteristics are created in relation to social and gender norms. The analysis showed that there are certain core traits that persist through time, such as femininity and the traditional feminine role, which are hard to change. However First Ladies such as Hillary Clinton and Michelle Obama are testing the limits of what is acceptable behavior with one Lady bringing a more active take on the role and the other, e.g., giving it a certain celebrity status. Both women are punished when they go too far into the political realm or step outside of their “proper” feminine role and they are pushed back into that role. As social norms slowly change so does acceptable behavior although the typical characteristics seem to consistently be present in the background. As there exists no set rules or guidelines as to what the role of the First Lady is it was necessary to look at the actions of recent First Ladies to define these characteristics. It was also necessary to examine what characteristics most of the First Ladies have had in common and how the public has rewarded them for behaving in certain ways.

A theoretical framework consisting of social constructivism, Barthes theory on the creation of myth and feminism in relation to the creation of the social construction of gender was created to help develop an understanding of how certain social norms come to be and aid in the creation of the typical characteristics. Using this theoretical framework it was argued that the characteristics evolve from social norms and mass media discourse that help create a certain stereotype of First Ladies that future ones are measured to. As social norms are different from one time and society to another it was argued that the role and typical characteristics of the First Lady change from one era to another as acceptable behavior of the First Lady changes alongside norms of acceptable female and male behavior.

With the aid of academic research, media discourse surrounding the First Ladies and examining remarks and behavior of former First Ladies in association with the theoretical framework this thesis argued the characteristics of a typical First Lady consist mostly of traits that fit with the traditional feminine role and are linked to gender norms associated with femininity. She is a hostess, a strong supporter of her husband, a spokesperson, advocates for him and his agenda, validates why people should vote for him, represents American women to

the world and should not go too far in influencing the President. She is also warm, friendly, approachable, classy and modest in behavior and attire. She should give up her job and assume the feminine role as well as picking a noncontroversial, charitable cause to advocate for. These characteristics are socially created and thus as society changes, they change.

Three examples of First Ladies were presented to help identify the typical characteristics and to show the difference between First Ladies as well as the influence of acceptable social norms at each time period. Each First Lady's background was briefly examined along with their defining characteristics, actions as First Lady and media discourse surrounding them. Subsequently each example of First Lady was compared to the previously defined typical characteristics and possible explanations for divergent behavior were given. The result of this analysis was three different types of First Ladies that each had their different defining characteristics. Hillary was defined as a polarizing First Lady that was well-educated, a career driven activist that shared a co-career marriage with her husband while Barbara was defined as a traditional wife, homemaker and national grandmother. As Michelle was both well-educated, outspoken and defined herself as a "mom-in-chief" she was placed between the two other First Ladies thus showing the difficulties of transferring the typical characteristics to real examples. The discussion surrounding these examples also reinforced the theory that as society changes the characteristics change with them as Hillary's time as First Lady helped pave the way for another career driven First Lady to do well in public opinion polls.

The next presidential elections will take place in 2016 and as Hillary Clinton has decided to run for President there is a real possibility that there will be a First Gentleman in the White House. It will be interesting to see what duties he will perform and how his role will be defined, especially in light of the fact that not only will Bill Clinton be the first First Gentleman if Hillary is elected, he will also be the first former President to move back into the White House as the current President's spouse. Will there finally be a true co-presidency, a "two-for-one" as Bill promised in his campaign in 1992?

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